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ABSTRACT

The speaker offers suggestions for improving the school board's public image. The suggestions include encouraging school board members to speak to community groups, hiring a trained person to work with the media, having board members visit schools and school advisory meetings, hiring community volunteers, and putting out an occasional newspaper supplement to inform the public of the board's actions. (IRT)

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IMPROVING THE SCHOOL BOARD IMAGE

Janet L. Nelson

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SPEAKER Nelson CLINIC NO. H-5 PROGRAM p. 23

REMARKS:

A POSITIVE SCHOOL BOARD IMAGE TO THE PUBLIC IS OF TREMENDOUS IMPORTANCE IN THIS ERA OF GREAT POLITICAL PRESSURE FROM OUR COMMUNITY AS WELL AS OUR EMPLOYEES. BEFORE THE FINANCIAL SITUATION BECAME SO DIFFICULT, THE EDUCATION ASSOCIATIONS BECAME SO AGGRESSIVE, AND THE SHADOW OF DOUBT WAS CAST BY LESS SCRUPULOUS OF OUR ELECTED OFFICIALS, SCHOOL BOARD DIRECTORS COULD SIT BEHIND THEIR BIG IMPRESSIVE DESKS AND LOOK VERY WISE. EVERYONE JUST BELIEVED SCHOOL BOARD DIRECTORS WERE VERY WISE! IT WAS NOT EVEN NECESSARY TO DEFEND YOUR IMAGE! NOW WE MUST WORK TO BUILD AND KEEP OUR PUBLIC'S CONFIDENCE.

FORTUNATELY WE ARE WAKING UP TO FACE THE IMPORTANT FACT THAT WE MUST KEEP OUR PUBLIC INFORMED OF OUR VIEWPOINT, OUR PROBLEMS AND DECISIONS. OTHERWISE WE WILL LITERALLY DIE FROM POOR LEGISLATION DUE TO LACK OF INFORMATIVE INPUT TO THE LEGISLATORS AND ADVERSE COURT DECISIONS BROUGHT ON BY IRATE PUBLICS. WE COULD DIE FROM BATTLE WOUNDS DEALT TO US BY WELL ORGANIZED AND WELL FINANCED TEACHERS UNIONS WHO WISH TO TAKE OVER OUR RESPONSIBILITIES AND REMOVE PUBLIC INPUT FROM THE ENTIRE EDUCATION PROCESS. SINCE SCHOOL BOARD DIRECTORS ARE THE CARETAKERS OF THIS BIG RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PUBLIC, WE MUST STRUGGLE TO STAY ALIVE.

THERE ARE MANY REASONS FOR PERSISTENT PUBLIC INTEREST IN SCHOOL BOARDS. THE PARENTS' MOST VALUABLE POSSESSION IS THEIR CHILD, AND THAT CHILD'S EDUCATION IS THE FOUNDATION FOR HIS OR HER WHOLE LIFE ON THIS EARTH. THE SCHOOL SYSTEM, TOUCHING NEARLY EVERY HOME, IS VERY OFTEN THE LARGEST BUSINESS IN THE AREA AND THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT TO THE REST OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY. MOST SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE STILL DEPENDENT UPON THE WILLINGNESS OF THE TAXPAYERS TO SUPPORT THE EDUCATION PROGRAM OF THEIR DISTRICT. THIS INCLUDES JUST ABOUT EVERY CITIZEN.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE OUR IMAGE?

BEFORE I GO ANY FURTHER, I WISH TO EXPLAIN THAT I AM A PRACTICAL, RATHER ELEMENTARY

EA 009 458

THINKING PERSON. SUGGESTIONS I SHARE WITH YOU TODAY MAY SOUND SIMPLE, BUT THEY HAVE ALL BEEN DONE VERY SUCCESSFULLY, HOWEVER NOT VERY UNIVERSALLY, BY SCHOOL BOARDS. IN MY OBSERVATIONS OF SCHOOL BOARDS WITH WHICH I AM PERSONALLY ACQUAINTED, THOSE WHO DO THESE RELATIVELY SIMPLE OPERATIONS WILL HAVE LITTLE CONFLICT WITH THEIR CONSTITUENTS OR THEIR EMPLOYEES. THOSE WHO DO NOT, ARE OFTEN ROASTED IN THE NEWS AND BOILED IN HOT WATER IN THEIR COMMUNITIES. ALL THESE SUGGESTIONS CAN BE DONE PRACTICALLY, WITH VERY LITTLE MONEY, BUT THEY DO REQUIRE A LITTLE EXTRA EFFORT AND PLANNING.

GOOD BOARD DIRECTORS CAN NO LONGER FEEL THAT JUST ATTENDING THE BOARD MEETINGS TO MAKE DECISIONS IS ALL THAT IS NECESSARY. THOSE WHO FEEL THIS WAY, OR THOSE WHO DO NOT HAVE THE TIME TO MAKE EXTRA EFFORT SHOULD THINK OF RESIGNING IN FAVOR OF SOMEONE WHO CAN AND WILL. WHEN MAKING IMPORTANT DECISIONS AND SETTING GOALS, SCHOOL BOARDS MUST ACTIVELY INFORM CONSTITUENTS AND SEEK OUT THE FEELINGS OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC.

HOW?

MANY, MANY TIMES YOU ARE ASKED TO SPEAK AT COMMUNITY FUNCTIONS OR ATTEND COMMUNITY MEETINGS. BE THERE! WHEN IT IS PRACTICAL, GIVE A TALK WHICH IS WARM AND POSITIVE. IN OUR DISTRICT, ALL FIVE BOARD MEMBERS ARE VERY DEDICATED TO THIS ATTITUDE. WE ENCOURAGE A STRONG PTSA, AND WE OFTEN ASK TO BE INVITED TO THEIR MEETINGS TO PRESENT A TOPIC OF INTEREST OR IMPORTANCE TO THEM. WE USUALLY ASK THE ADMINISTRATOR MOST INVOLVED IN THE TOPIC UNDER DISCUSSION TO ACCOMPANY US AND AFTER THE TALK, TURN THE TIME INTO A QUESTION "RAP" SESSION. TRAIN YOURSELVES TO BE SENSITIVE TO YOUR AUDIENCES AND YOU WILL GAIN VALUABLE INSIGHTS FROM THESE SESSIONS. ALWAYS BE OPEN AND FRIENDLY AND AVOID TRYING A "SNOW JOB". MOST AUDIENCES CAN SENSE YOUR SINCERITY, OR LACK OF IT, WHICH REALLY CAUSES YOUR CREDIBILITY TO GAP!

OUR DIRECTORS EACH PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY IN MANY COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS KIWANIS, LIONS, ROTARY, VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS, LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS, CHURCHES AND SO ON. OFTEN WE ARE INVITED TO SPEAK TO THOSE GROUPS, THUS REACHING ANOTHER GROUP OF CONSTITUENTS.

WHEN YOU RECEIVE INVITATIONS TO SPEAK, USE THEM WISELY AND BRAVELY, NOT FRIVOLOUSLY. USE THE OPPORTUNITY IN THESE TALKS TO EXPLAIN THE PROBLEMS OF DEALING WITH MANDATED PROGRAMS AND EARMARKED FUNDING AND GIVE THE MOST GRAPHIC EXAMPLES YOU CAN THINK OF, AND EXACTLY HOW THESE MAY EFFECT YOUR SCHOOLS. DISCUSS THE FORTHCOMING LAWS IN THE LEGISLATURE AND JUST HOW THESE NEW LAWS WILL EFFECT YOUR DISTRICT.

I TRUST YOU THOROUGHLY STUDY THINGS BEFORE DECISIONS ARE MADE. TALK ABOUT HOW THE STUDIES ARE DONE AND WHO DOES THEM AND ON WHAT SUBJECTS. PATRONS WILL THEN KNOW YOU DON'T MAKE SNAP DECISIONS. THEY WILL ALSO KNOW WHERE THEY MIGHT FUNNEL SOME INPUT IF

THEY FEEL STRONGLY ABOUT A GIVEN SUBJECT OR PROGRAM. YOU WILL ALSO LEARN OF THEIR STRONG FEELINGS AND CAN TRY TO COPE WITH THEM BEFORE AN EXPLOSION APPEARS IN THE PUBLIC NEWSPAPERS.

DISCUSS YOUR CURRICULUM EXTENSIVELY. BE SURE YOUR PUBLIC KNOWS THE STRENGTHS AND THE GENERAL CURRICULUM GOALS. OCCASIONALLY TRY OUT IDEAS WITH CERTAIN KNOWLEDGEABLE GROUPS FOR THEIR REACTION. ONCE A MONTH, TRY TO SCHEDULE CURRICULUM PRESENTATIONS AT YOUR BOARD MEETINGS WITH THE TOPIC PUBLICIZED AND THE TEACHERS THEMSELVES MAKING PRESENTATIONS. REQUIRE STAFF PERSONS WHO TRAVEL TO CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS AT DISTRICT EXPENSE, TO MAKE PERSONAL PRESENTATIONS TO THE BOARD. THIS INFORMS YOUR PUBLIC AND GIVES YOU THE ADDED BENEFIT OF BECOMING MORE ACQUAINTED WITH YOUR STAFF, YOUR CURRICULUM AND NEW IDEAS FROM OTHER AREAS.

IN MY DISTRICT WE HAVE IMPROVED OUR IMAGE WHEN BOARD MEMBERS HAVE VISITED OUR SCHOOLS. WE ARE RECEIVED VERY WARMLY BECAUSE WE MAKE GREAT EFFORT TO LET THE PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS KNOW WE ARE THERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE DISTRICT, NOT TO CRITICIZE. GREAT BENEFITS ARE GAINED BY ASKING AND RECEIVING ADVICE FROM OUR PEOPLE IN THE SCHOOLS WHO ARE ON THE LOCAL "FIRING LINE" WITH THE PUBLIC. OUR EMPLOYEES KNOW WE UNDERSTAND THEIR POSITION AND APPRECIATE THEIR PROFESSIONAL TALENTS AND EXPERTISE, AND THEY RESPECT AND HELP OUR BOARD IMAGE TO THE PUBLIC IN RETURN.

IT IS IMPERATIVE TO ENLIST SOME GOOD EMISSARIES. YOU CAN'T DO IT ALL BY YOURSELVES. ASSOCIATED PARENT GROUPS, INTERESTED CITIZENS AND THE PROFESSIONALS WE HIRE CAN BE VERY EFFECTIVELY USED AS ADVISORY GROUPS. AT THE FORMATION OF SUCH COMMITTEES, SCHOOL BOARDS AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE IN A GOOD POSITION TO GIVE THE MEMBERS ACCURATE BACKGROUND INFORMATION WITH WHICH TO MEASURE THEIR JUDGMENT. I DO NOT MEAN THIS IS DONE TO INFLUENCE THE COMMITTEE OR TO MAKE THEM "RUBBER STAMP", BUT TO EDUCATE THEM SO THEY CAN MAKE WORKABLE RECOMMENDATIONS, WITHIN THE DISTRICT STRUCTURE, AND ALSO UNDERSTAND THE MANY LAWS AND RESTRAINTS UNDER WHICH WE LABOR. COMMUNITY PEOPLE AND TEACHERS WHO HELP BUILD A RECOMMENDATION WILL GO FORTH WITH FAVORABLE AND ACCURATE PUBLICITY IN THE COMMUNITY. USE DIFFERENT GROUPS FOR DIFFERENT COMMITTEES, GAINING MORE INFORMED, SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE.

INCIDENTALLY, I PERSONALLY BELIEVE THAT A BOARD DIRECTOR SHOULD ALSO ATTEND THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETINGS. THE POSITIVE RESULT IS THE BOARD MEMBER WHO SITS WITH THE COMMITTEE CAN EXPLAIN THE THINKING AND FLAVOR OF THE RECOMMENDATION, IF NEEDED, TO THE OTHER DIRECTORS, BUT EVEN MORE IMPORTANT, THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE KNOW THE BOARD IS HONESTLY INTERESTED IN THEIR DELIBERATIONS.

AFTER A STUDY HAS BEEN COMPLETED AND A FINAL DECISION HAS BEEN MADE BY THE BOARD, EVEN

IF THERE HAS BEEN A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION, UNITE BEHIND THE MAJORITY DECISION. A FRACTURED BOARD IS NOT A GOOD IMAGE TO PRESENT. A GOOD SCHOOL BOARD WILL ALWAYS STUDY DECISIONS CAREFULLY AND THOROUGHLY SO THEY WILL NOT FIND THEMSELVES LOSING CREDIBILITY BY HAVING TO REVERSE DECISIONS.

ANOTHER GOOD SOURCE FOR "GOOD IMAGE EMISSARIES" IS TO HIRE COMMUNITY PEOPLE FOR BUS DRIVERS, AIDES FOR CLASSROOM, PLAYGROUND AND LIBRARIES, REGISTERED NURSES FROM THE COMMUNITY TO SERVE AS SCHOOL NURSES, AND OTHER CLASSIFIED POSITIONS. I AM SURE MOST SCHOOL DISTRICTS DO THIS, BUT DO THE BOARD DIRECTORS MAKE AN EXTRA EFFORT TO BE SURE THOSE PEOPLE REALIZE THEY THINK ALL EMPLOYEES ARE IMPORTANT? CLASSIFIED EMPLOYEES OFTEN CAN REACH A DIFFERENT SEGMENT OF THE COMMUNITY, SO LET'S HOPE OUR IMAGE WITH THEM IS FAVORABLE ALSO.

ENCOURAGE VOLUNTEERS IN YOUR SCHOOLS. OFTEN THE LITTLE EXTRA EFFORT TO TRAIN VOLUNTEERS AND ADAPT TO THE VOLUNTEER'S SCHEDULING IS REPAID MANY, MANY TIMES IN A SUPPORTER OF A GOOD SCHOOL DISTRICT IMAGE DEVELOPED THIS WAY, AND OF COURSE THIS REFLECTS NICELY ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS!

THERE ARE GOOD WAYS OF USING THE NEWS MEDIA TO PRESENT THE EDUCATION PROGRAMS OR PROBLEMS TO THE PUBLIC. UP TO THIS POINT THERE HAS BEEN MUCH CONFUSION ON HOW TO GET SCHOOL BOARD VIEWPOINT ACROSS ETHICALLY AND ACCURATELY. TEACHERS UNIONS SEEM TO HAVE BETTER COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS THAN WE DO, SO THE NEWSPEOPLE OBTAINED THEIR INFORMATION DURING CRISIS FROM THEM. ONE-SIDED NEWS IS SELDOM ACCURATE, BUT WE ARE OFTEN SUSPECT. SET UP A PUBLIC INFORMATION SYSTEM.

ENCOURAGE YOUR STATE SCHOOL DIRECTORS ORGANIZATION TO PRESENT PUBLIC RELATIONS SEMINARS BY EXPERTS AND OTHER DIRECTOR EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO HELP YOU KNOW HOW TO RESPOND TO MEDIA INQUIRIES.

IF AT ALL FINANCIALLY POSSIBLE, HIRE A PERSON AND SEE THAT HE OR SHE BECOMES ACQUAINTED WITH THE NEWS PEOPLE IN YOUR AREA SO REPORTERS KNOW WHERE TO QUICKLY AND EASILY GET SCHOOL BOARD INFORMATION BEFORE THEIR DEADLINES. MAKE YOUR PUBLIC INFORMATION PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL FACTS, ETC. WHICH TRULY REPRESENT A CONSENSUS OF YOUR BOARD AND ADMINISTRATIVE VIEWPOINT FOR THE NEWS MEDIA AS SOON AS NEWS BREAKS IN YOUR DISTRICT.

IF YOU CANNOT AFFORD A SEPARATE POSITION, TRAIN SOMEONE ON YOUR STAFF TO DO THIS IMPORTANT JOB.

ENCOURAGE YOUR PUBLIC INFORMATION PERSON AND ALL YOUR DIRECTORS TO ATTEND SEMINARS ON PUBLIC RELATIONS SO YOU ARE ALL KNOWLEDGEABLE IN HANDLING THIS VERY IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITY. BE SURE YOUR BOARD CHAIRPERSON IS EXPERIENCED IN PUBLIC RELATIONS WITH THE

MEDIA. MANY PRACTICAL, INEXPENSIVE BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE AND SHOULD BE PURCHASED AND STUDIED. I HAVE TWO GOOD SAMPLES WITH ME: TELLING THE PTA STORY, PUT OUT BY THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS AND HOW TO START AND IMPROVE A P.R. PROGRAM, BY DON BAGIN OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION.

THE SCHOOL BOARD SHOULD MAKE ARRANGEMENTS WITH LOCAL NEWSPAPERS OR TELEVISION STATIONS TO "TELL THE STORY ABOUT THE SCHOOLS". DAY TO DAY STORIES OF HUMAN INTEREST, IMPORTANT DECISIONS, AND SPECIAL HAPPENINGS OF GENERAL INTEREST CAN BE WRITTEN AND SENT TO THEM. WITH THE GREAT AMOUNT OF SENSATIONAL NEWS AVAILABLE, WE NEED TO MAKE SURE OUR WRITINGS ARE INTERESTING. PARENTS' HUMAN INTEREST IN THEIR STUDENT'S CLASSES CAN BE VERY EFFECTIVE FOR CREATING AN INTEREST IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S GOOD IMAGE.

IN MY DISTRICT WE HAVE A SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT WITH OUR LOCAL WEEKLY NEWSPAPER FOR A TABLOID SECTION OF FOUR PAGES EACH IN SIX ISSUES, SPACED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR. I HAVE BROUGHT SOME SAMPLES TO SHOW YOU TODAY. THE COST FOR THE 1976-77 ISSUES WAS $7,490.00. WE DETERMINE WHAT WE WANT TO FEATURE AND THE NEWSPAPER DOES A BEAUTIFUL JOB FOR US. WE RARELY GET COMPLAINTS ON THIS EXPENDITURE, AND WHEN WE EXPLAIN TO THE COMPLAINING PERSON IT IS OUR EFFORT TO KEEP THEM WELL INFORMED ON WHAT WE ARE DOING, THEY END UP HAPPY ABOUT IT. THE COMMUNITY FEELING IN GENERAL IS VERY, VERY POSITIVE ABOUT THE TABLOID SECTION AND THEY LOOK FORWARD TO EACH ISSUE. WE FIND DECIDING WHAT TO FEATURE CAN BE AN EXCITING EXPERIENCE IN ITSELF, AND WE COMPETE TO COME UP WITH THE BEST IDEAS.

THE NATIONAL SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION (NSPRA) CAN GIVE YOU SOME VERY VALUABLE HELP. LOOK INTO WHAT THEY OFFER WHICH CAN BE OF HELP TO YOUR DISTRICT.

ASSIGN ONE BOARD DIRECTOR THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR WRITING AT LEAST A PARAGRAPH EACH MONTH FOR THE PTSA NEWSLETTER. MANY EXTRA THINGS THE BOARD DIRECTORS DO ARE OF INTEREST TO PTSA, i.e. MEETINGS WITH OTHER COMMUNITY GROUPS, NEW CURRICULUM, NEW POLICIES ADOPTED WHICH COULD EFFECT THEM AND SO ON.

RECENTLY I VISITED A NEIGHBORING SCHOOL BOARD MEETING AND WAS VERY IMPRESSED WITH A SPECIAL VISITOR'S AGENDA INTRODUCTION THEY USE FOR ALL BOARD MEETINGS. FOR THIS IDEA I FELT "A PICTURE WAS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS" SO I PREPARED THIS TRANSPARENCY TO TELL YOU ABOUT IT. THE FIRST SECTION IS DESIGNED TO WELCOME VISITORS AND TO STRAIGHTFORWARDLY EXPLAIN THE LEGAL DUTIES OF THE ELECTED BOARD OF EDUCATION DIRECTORS AND JUST HOW THOROUGHLY THEY CARRY OUT THIS SERIOUS RESPONSIBILITY. FOLLOWING THAT IS THE MEETING AGENDA WITH OTHER BITS OF EXPLANATION, FURTHER EDUCATING THE PUBLIC ON THE OPERATION OF THEIR DISTRICT AND BOARD OF DIRECTORS. I CAN HARDLY THINK OF A BETTER TIME OR PLACE, OR A MORE POSITIVE, OPEN METHOD TO BEGIN IMPROVING YOUR SCHOOL BOARD

IMAGE THAN YOUR OWN BOARD MEETING.

COFFEE WITH THE PRINCIPALS, CALL THE SUPERINTENDENT MESSAGES OR SPECIAL PHONE NUMBERS PUBLICIZED TO "DIAL AN ANSWER" ARE VERY EFFECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOLS ALSO.

EVEN WITH A GOOD PUBLIC RELATIONS SYSTEM, THE BOARD CANNOT BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE OR GROUPS OF PEOPLE. OUR FIRST DUTY IS TO PROVIDE THE BEST EDUCATION POSSIBLE FOR ALL STUDENTS, WITHIN THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE. WE MUST WORK AT THE JOB OF BEING INTERESTED IN ALL PHASES OF EDUCATION FOR OUR YOUNG PEOPLE, DO OUR HOMEWORK ALWAYS, "GET OUR ACT TOGETHER" AND BE READY TO RELATE BACK TO THE PUBLIC POSITIVELY AND FAIRLY. OUR IMAGE AS A BOARD AND AS INDIVIDUALS WILL THEN BE REFLECTED IN OUR EFFORTS TO BE CONSIDERATE, POSITIVE, AND INFORMATIVE PUBLIC SERVANTS WORKING FOR THEIR KIDS.